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ABSTRACT

To introduce students to the actual environment in which professional level communication takes place early in the term of a business writing course, students are asked what they believe to be the major communication difficulties faced by business people in their everyday routines. The responses are listed and then compared with actual instances submitted by local business people. The discussion in class focuses on the best solutions to these difficulties and the easiest ways of approaching them. Next, students are asked to choose a firm in the area of their chosen field and to arrange with a member of the firm for an interview. Questions focus on the place business communications has in that particular firm and other firms of its type and the duties, assignments, or skills the student in that field should strive to achieve in college. The last part of the class project requires students to transcribe the information gathered during their conferences and to write a coherent report such as they might have to submit in an actual job situation. By the time most students have finished reporting the results of their interviews, they admit to being surprised at how much time business people spend in communicating with others and how many varieties of communicative skills are needed. (HOD)

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EMPHASIZING PROFESSIONALISM: AN ASSIGNMENT IN BUSINESS WRITING

Charles W. Nelson

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CS 209 201

EMPHASIZING PROFESSIONALISM: AN ASSIGNMENT IN BUSINESS WRITING

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ABSTRACT: A good business writer or accountant communicates. He does this in a variety of ways ranging from oral to written reports. Without these skills, he will never succeed. Thus the task of the business writing teacher is important: teach the need for communication skills. This is a difficult task as many undergraduates are not convinced that such skills are important outside the classroom. Dissatisfied with most textbook exercises, I developed a class project to introduce my students to the actual environment in which professional communication takes place. This paper describes the procedures and methods I use and explains their applicability to several different academic disciplines.

Once a student has finished his course of study and has advanced into the world of business or other professional fields, he usually discovers that much of his time is taken up in communicating his ideas to others. This might be done through written reports, letters to those outside his own field, memos, oral presentations, interviews or written summations of conferences or meetings. Without the skills necessary to complete these activities, the student's work will all be for naught. One of the major differences between the professional and the beginner, then, is the variety of communication skills which the professional regularly employs.

Students need to develop these communication skills if they are ever to find success in their chosen fields. It is often a losing battle, however, to convince undergraduates of this need. Brainwashed by years of TV watching and bombarded by modern advertising techniques, many students are convinced that each of them will be assigned a secretary who will not only assemble all the information needed, but also write it up in a presentable form. Disabusing students of this illusion and convincing them of the

importance of acquiring communication skills of their own is often of the most frustrating challenges faced by the writing teacher.

The difficulty of this task is compounded by the fact that many students feel that the writing teacher is merely trying to fill his own classes or to magnify his own importance by stressing the necessity of developing good communication skills. In addition, in the classroom situation, many of the assignments to be found in current textbooks seem terribly contrived and artificial; their principal aim seems to be to generate paper and/or to require busywork.

After several years of experimentation and discussion, I have developed a class project designed to introduce my students to the actual environment in which professional-level communication takes place, put them in close contact with an expert who must exercise communication skills and finally require them to put these skills into actual practice. Because my classes include students in several different areas of the field of communications I have adapted my project to the needs of multiple disciplines. This, I believe, is one of its major advantages since it can be used for the specific needs of the individual instructor.

In the business writing course which I teach at Michigan Technological University, the students represent many options in the field of business ranging from Personnel Management to Accounting. Each of them is going to face slightly different communication problems, but all share the need to gain experience in dealing with the proper procedures. Early in the term, the members of the class are asked what they believe to be the major communication difficulties faced by business people in their everday routines. The responses are listed and then compared with actual instances submitted

by local businessmen. The discussion in class then focuses on the best solutions to these difficulties and the easiest ways of approaching them. One of the best ways to get the students started on this phase of the project is to give them copies of actual letters received by local businesses and to ask them to write appropriate responses. Comparing the resultant letters with those actually sent by the companies also serves to make the students more aware of the important role which communication plays in the business world.

Once this has been accomplished, the rest of the assignment is explained. Each student must choose a firm in the area which hires graduates in his major field. The accountants are encouraged to seek out an accounting firm, the management majors, a management firm, etc. They are discouraged from selecting anyone with the academic community of a place of business where they might work after school hours. It is better that they move out of familiar areas and become acquainted with more aspects of the communication process.

When the initial contacts are made, the students are expected to arrange with a member of the firm for an interview during which the place and importance of communication skills in that business will be discussed. In this way, the students will not only be hearing about the importance of communication from someone actually at work in their fields, but they will also be developing their own skills through practice in interviewing--one of the areas they will be expected to be proficient in later in their careers. Indeed, since one of the most important parts of their job searches is the formal interview, this step is prepared for in great detail.

The ingenuity of the classes in seeking out businesspeople to question

has been considerable and those eventually contacted reflect the wide variety of interests and major fields represented by the students enrolled. During the last year, the people interviewed included the local administrative assistant to our Member of Congress, a Personnel Manager for the local department store, a CPA, a public relations expert, a Water Quality Specialist for the DNR, the president of a Savings and Loan, the Loan Officer for the city bank and a Legal Secretary.

While the appointments are being arranged, the techniques of successful interviewing are thoroughly covered through the material in the textbook and actual classroom examples. Since focus and planning are of such great importance and since the time with the local business people will be somewhat limited, these points are stressed. The students are asked to narrow their focus to two basic topics: (1) the place business communications has in that particular firm and other firms of its type and (2) the duties, assignments, or skills the student in that field should strive to achieve in college so that he will be more fully prepared when he enters the job market.

To assist the students further, the more practical aspects of interviewing are demonstrated in class through mock interviews between the instructor and selected students and later between the students themselves. Several of these are video-taped and critiqued in detail to explain the best approaches and to underscore the weak points. As a further aid, the students are given instruction on the techniques of questionnaire writing and then asked to submit a sample survey form which they will actually use at the interview itself. Again, these are critiqued in detail to explain all of the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods. Samples of

selected questionnaires are put on the overhead projector so that everyone has a chance to judge their effectiveness. Finally, some members of the class are asked to use their questionnaires during the mock interviews to see if they facilitate the gathering of information and to serve to keep the conversation focused and flowing.

A representative selection of these students developed questions demonstrates the pragmatic approach taken by most of the members of the class as well as the areas of communication which they felt were important:

A. Questions about the job

1. How did you (the interviewee) get this job?
2. What specific degrees are usually requested?
3. What minors are considered valuable when one is applying for jobs such as this?
4. How important are grades to job acquisition?
5. Which do you consider more important--course work or job experience?
6. What kind of job-related experience should I be equipped with when I finish college?
7. Can you suggest special courses, internships or programs that would supplement my basic degree work?
8. What personality traits are necessary for work such as this? (Aggressiveness? Patience? Tact?)
9. What can I do to make myself an outstanding candidate for a job such as yours?
10. How does one find out about position openings in this business/firm/corporation/etc.?
11. What is the best way to apply for a job here?
12. Can you offer any suggestions on ways to make the transition between college- and professional-life easier?
13. What are the prospects for stable employment in this industry for the next 5-10 years?
14. Anything else I should know?

B. Questions about writing on the job

1. Are writing skills something I should develop while I am in school?
2. What specific skills?
3. What kinds (letters, memos, reports, etc.) of writing will it be necessary for me to be proficient at?
4. Are there form letters in use here?
5. How much time will I have to write whatever is necessary?

6. Is emphasis put on an extensive vocabulary and command of form, or on precision and clarity, brevity?
7. Does writing well figure in when I am being considered for a promotion?
8. Can you suggest specific courses in writing that I should take when I'm finished with my current one?
9. Are office skills (typing, filing, dictaphone, etc.) helpful to someone in my position?
10. May I have samples of work that is typical of what I can expect to have to write?

A last bit of instruction is given in the area of note taking during an interview as well as some explanation of the advantages of taping the conference for purposes of processing the information and making the eventual job of writing it up in a readable form that much easier. These skills, which we automatically assume students to have developed during their education process, are often overlooked both in the textbooks and in class.

With all of this preparation behind them, the students then begin their interviews of area business people. During these interviews, they are encouraged to ask for any company brochures or in-house publications which might offer information about that organization. They are also told to ask for copies of memos, reports or bulletins which are issued to employees. The old cliche still holds true: "a picture is worth a thousand words," and having the students actually see the communication process at work in a company is worth more than all of the lectures or readings which we can give them.

Since an integral part of the communication process is to synthesize information gathered from various sources, and since many business reports today are based on interviews or discussion groups, the last part of this project is for the students to transcribe the information gathered during their conferences and to write a coherent report such as they might have to

submit in an actual job situation. This sharpens their skills in paraphrasing and summarizing and also emphasizes the importance of quoting accurately since they are required to include some direct quotes from the interview. To help prepare them for this, the chapters in the textbook dealing with transcribing and editing are covered at this time and several short exercises are assigned. At the conclusion of their reports, the students are asked to summarize what they learned about communication in their fields and to give their view of how important writing and speaking skills are in most professional jobs.

The results of this class project have been quite positive. Since its primary aim is to demonstrate to the students the importance of communications skills in the professional fields they have chosen to enter, it is the conclusions in that area which were most significant. By the time most students have finished reporting the results of their interviews, they admit to being surprised at how much time business people spend in communicating with others and how many varieties of communicative skills are needed. An unexpected bonus was the importance which most of those interviewed placed on communication skills as essential elements of their jobs and the need for developing them to be competitive on the job market. In addition to convincing them of this, the exercise also trains them in designing workable questionnaires and gives them practice in interviewing techniques.

The response from the local business community has also been favorable as it gives them a chance to meet and to evaluate some prospective employees. In a letter written after the conclusion of the exercise, one town businessman remarked: "In the young man sitting across from me, I saw myself at an earlier date: nervous, hesitant and unsure. I only wish that

I had been given this kind of opportunity to find out a little of what lay ahead of me."